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The Tree of Life

by Friik Landman

The refrain, *Africa, the tree of life*, may be heard in the African Union (AU) anthem. On listening carefully, we can envisage images of abundance: the contented laughter of well-fed children; communities living in the spirit of *ubuntu*, bringing humanity to a world gone slightly mad; productive youth contributing to economic growth; leaders debating ways of caring for the continent and smoothing the way for enterprise – everyone diligently striving for the sustainable growth of the Tree of Life, Africa.

Juxtaposed to this, the latest report on the Millennium Goals provides a reality check: *“Although there have been major gains in several areas and the Goals remain achievable in most African nations, even the best governed countries on the continent have not been able to make sufficient progress in reducing extreme poverty in its many forms.”*

When the deliberation around leadership is only an intellectual exercise, when it remains trapped in the pages of a thesis or an article, it serves none but the esoteric few. The laboratory of leadership is life. African life tests our leadership daily, and, among many others, two areas are of importance. Firstly, we as African leaders need to embrace the challenge of realising the Millennium Goals. Secondly, we need to make a serious effort to tell the world our success stories, from small wins to major victories.

Our political leaders must practise ethics in its purest form: *being of service to others*. They need to align their espoused intent with reality in a concrete way. The continent beckons them diligently to seek ways to move from crisis and conflict, to peace and stability. Their service to those they lead is to create an environment for social and economic well-being. The African people long for

meaningful social value to be embedded in leaders' promises. Chief O Okereke says: *“Let the guns implode, the wooden barrels decompose to fertilize a vibrant agriculture, and the metallic barrels and structures be melted for industrialization. Let the ensuing abundance fill up the [hungry] and the rest of society for the complete healing of Africa.”*

When 80 per cent or more of people do not have access to the formal financial systems, economic viability seems unattainable. We need leaders in the financial sector actively to pursue ways of luring the estimated R12 billion under-the-mattress money into the formal system.

It is, on the other hand, refreshing to observe the practical facilitation of connectivity across Africa. With over 200 million mobile phone owners on the continent, the convergence of telecommunications through the mobile phone offers development-minded leaders a plethora of possibilities. Leadership in ITC needs to result in many services opening up for the people of Africa.

Leaders of Africa should mindfully search for and communicate these success stories of the continent. Stories of our developing nations should be tightly tied into the Millennium Goals. In all our communications, to each other and to the developed world, we have to lead the conversations about positive reform and good governance: such as stories of measured improvement in accountability; Tanzania bringing corruption under control; peer-tutoring in Benin producing excellent results; empowerment of farmers in Angola making them more prosperous, etc.

These stories, told well and often, will have a leadership effect and will influence potential investors in this continent, who form a critical component of our social and economic well-being.

We, as leaders in Africa, have our leadership task cut out for us. It should force us out of our ivory towers and direct our leadership behaviour. ■



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***O Sons and Daughters of Africa
Flesh of the Sun and Flesh of the Sky
Let us make Africa the Tree of Life***